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Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai Interview

Flor Sigaran
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Interviewer: Flor Sigaran

Artist: Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai

Phone Interview: Chicago, IL to Brooklyn, New York

Date: 4:00pm-6:30pm EST on February 23, 2010

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter Quarter 2009/2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



Artist Bio

Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai is a Chicago-born, Brooklyn-based Chinese Taiwanese American spoken word artist who fights for cultural pride and survival through how she spits and how she lives.

Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai has been featured in over 400 performances worldwide at venues including the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, the House of Blues, the Apollo Theater, Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, and three seasons of the award-winning "Russell Simmons Presents HBO Def Poetry." The author of *Inside Outside Outside Inside* (2004) and *Thought Crimes* (2005) and the CD *Infinity Breaks* (2006), Tsai has shared stages with Mos Def, KRS-One, Sonia Sanchez, Talib Kweli, Erykah Badu, Amiri Baraka, and many more.

Kelly was a part of the original collective for Mango Tribe, an Asian Pacific Islander American women's multidisciplinary spoken word theater troupe. She wrote, performed, and choreographed for Mango Tribe's three mainstage productions ("Sisters in the Smoke" (2002), "The Creation Myth Project" (2004), and "Un/knowning Desire and Empire" (2006)), as well as Mango Tribe's national tour from 2002-2006.

Kelly's formative experiences as a community organizer, domestic violence counselor, oral historian, and youth worker deeply inform her commitment to the arts and entertainment as a means to forge the foundations for social justice, non-violence and the uplift of underrepresented people, ideas, and movements. She holds a double B.A. with high honors in Urban Planning and Comparative Literature from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is proud alum of Michelle Obama's Public Allies and also worked

previously with the Posse Foundation Inc., founded by MacArthur Genius Grant recipient Debbie Bial.

(Information from Zen-Yie Tsai's official website: www.yellowgurl.com)

Questions & Answers with Spoken Word Artist Kelly Tsai

I: Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

KT: Most definitely. So I grew up in a Chicago suburb, my family originally immigrated to the United States from Taiwan. They came to Akron, Ohio in 1968 and 1969. My dad is a chemical engineer; you know he still kinda consults these days. So he went to school at the University of Akron in Ohio and my mom came here the next year after that.

In terms of my family's history, my father's family is from Tainan, which is kinda the more rural part in central Taiwan. So his family were all people that were involved with the sugar plantations and sugar refineries in the area. So kind of like little farmer boy, he grew up, you know his parents died when he was very young so he pretty much grew up pretty self-sufficient out in the countryside with his brothers and sisters. And my mom is like the complete opposite. Her family was originally from Shanghai; my grandfather was a politician in Shanghai before Mao took over. So of course like a lot of folks, my mother's family fled to Taiwan. And so my mother was four years old when she came to Taiwan so she still identifies very much as being Chinese. Because culturally she's very much Chinese, and she speaks primarily Mandarin, although she understands Taiwanese. But she grew up the majority of her life in Taipei in Taiwan. So she was like the total city girl, you know all this kind of stuff, you know had a very public life in some ways since my grandpa was still a politician, kind of man about town. So I guess the legend goes that my parents met at English language class, so they both had plans to come to the U.S and definitely at that time in Taiwan it was kind of seen as like if, you know, you're smart enough and if you can, you should definitely go to America, it's like no question. And so my parents went to Taida [National Taiwan University], which is considered the best school in Taiwan and came to the U.S.

So my parents first moved to Akron, Ohio, then they moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts and had my sister, and then moved to the Chicago suburbs in Rolling Meadows and I was born there in 1978. And I grew up out in the suburbs all the way up till 18 and then I went to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. And then I was living in Chicago on the North side and the South side before I moved to New York six years ago. So yeah and I'm a Spoken Word Artist, kinda like how that, or should you ask the next question officially and then I'll talk about that?

I: Yes so...

KT: I'm already answering it.

I: Yeah that's good though. So what lead you to performing Spoken Word, when and where did you start?

KT: Yeah in terms of my relationship with writing and performance I was always really into writing and I think it is something that I can't really explain, you know, I don't remember a time when I was a kid that I wasn't writing. My mom was very, my parents only spoke to us in English growing up, they spoke to us a little bit in Mandarin and that got less and less as we got older because basically they were really

concerned about us learning English properly and all that kind of stuff. So my mom used to take us to the library every weekend and I remember doing dorky things like volunteering at the library during the summers and things like that.

I: Yeah I understand you there.

KT: It's so dorky, but obviously these things have an effect. You know so I'm a writer now so if, I remember sitting, I remember spending the summertime indoors and they would give us this foamy stuff that we'd have to spray onto the book to clean them and stuff, they just make the kids do whatever you know, this was at the Rolling Meadows Public Library.

So you know I was always really into writing, and my big sister was really into writing and she read voraciously, you know so of course just like any little sister I wanted to be just like my big sister. And you know I would act like I read as much as she did but I definitely did not. Yeah and so as a kid I was a performer, like I used to do, you know my first performances were dance performances and I think all of these think coalesce into who I am today, you know as an artist over time. Because a lot of times when people watch me perform they'll say there's a kind of physical text that's created in my writing in addition[omit s] to the words and the general vocal performance of it, and I think that's really because of the performer, you know the first way that I knew to express myself was through a dancer.

I: Can I ask you what type of dancing?

KT: Oh yeah it was like ballet, tap, jazz, that whole kind of thing. I have a vague memory of doing some traditional Chinese dance at like Chinese school, you know like Chinese Sunday school, you know like most Chinese girls have to go to. So a little bit of that but it was mostly ballet, tap, jazz, and as I got older I did everything from like Break-Dancing to Capoeira, to Butoh to Flamenco to Hula, you know everything. And modern and all that kind of stuff.

So as a little kid I always loved to write. A couple years ago I found these stories that were at my parents' house that I had written when I was in third or fourth grade. I realized there's like multiple stories that are all about little girls that grow up to be writers against all odds. You know so I think that it's something in me that started really early on, but I think that part of that, and I think that this could be related to really be thinking about an Asian American experience, particularly being who I was and the environment that I was growing up in, writing was something where I always felt very comfortable being myself. I always felt like I had a place, I had a voice, you know and it was a place that gave me a voice probably in a way that other places didn't. I was kind of like shy when I was a kid, which is hard for people to believe now. And officially I started... I was first exposed to spoken word through a high school English teacher who used to sneak us into bars in Chicago, like the Green Mill and another couple spots, you know with a couple of my friends just to because he was really into the Poetry Slam scene and he just wanted to share that with us. You know and I felt very thankful having had [omit an] adults in my life who -- as a teenager -- weren't only trying to do that book knowledge kind of stuff with you, like they were really trying to show me what they were passionate about and show me the different parts of the world, their world you know. So to this day I haven't seen my high school English teacher perform at

a poetry event, he doesn't like to perform he just likes to go, he's like the organizer and all that kind of stuff.

I: Did he (the English teacher) run a poetry, creative writing program at your school?

KT: You know at my school I was really lucky, our English department was really strong. And I think that not only was it really strong, but it wasn't just people who felt passionate about, who felt passionate just about teaching, but about literature, and about where it occurs in your life in every way. And it wasn't just one teacher, it was a bunch of them and so they were able to kinda join forces together and do great things for us as student. So I am very luck in that way, you know we had teachers, from people who were very involved with creative writing, or journalism, or any kind of genre, they even started a, it was my senior year in high school, this was a high school over in Palatine, they started a Writer's Week. So they brought in writers from all over the country to come talk to students, sometimes they would bring back Alumni, I've gone back and speak and stuff like that. So my friends now who are poets, they're so funny because they'll be like, oh my god you went to Fremd [High School], you know like if they get asked to go to Writer's Week, and they're like, that is the nerdiest school ever, you know like all the writers are like rock stars. But that's good, it created a culture where that was something that was cool, you know and they allowed us that space. They used to organize Poetry Slams for us, and this was back in '92 to '96, so this was before things like Youth Speaks was created, or like Young Chicago Authors had a little bit of a different vibe than what it does now, you know what I mean. There really wasn't much youth spoken word programming whatsoever I don't think anywhere in the country at that point anywhere. I was just really lucky because I had teachers that personally themselves were involved in Poetry Slams in Chicago in particular. So that's kinda how I got started. It's very natural to me to think about writing and performing all as one thing, and thinking about them as the writing process happens both on the page and on the stage. And it also happens in isolation as well as with an audience because that's how I grew up writing, because I always grew up writing knowing that there was an open mic that was gonna happen or there's a Poetry Slam coming up, or I would watch the adults on the scene and how they would come back week after week with either a new revision or a new poem, you know the same poem over and over and over again but there are so many different ways that you can really make that poem move you know. So I learned a lot and I never really would have guessed or understood that that would be so central or fundamental in my path into adulthood. But I think that what's the great thing about it, it was just something that I didn't think that I loved it, it did something to me, it spoke to me, it made sense to me so it felt very natural. And I think that something that was a little bit different about growing up in that scene, watching a lot of the Poetry Slam people like in the early to mid '90's in the adult scene, people like Patricia Smith who was the four time national champion, and people like Marc Smith who people credited as the founder of the Poetry Slam, [omit and] the actual competition that happens in bars, you know the international Poetry Slam movement, people like Chuck Perkins, Ken[omit T] Green, Mama Maria McCray, Cin Salach, Tyehimba Jess, Shelia Donahue. These were people that I definitely remember polishing what they do and it meant a lot to me, it spoke to me even though my experiences were vastly different from theirs. So and I think that it's a little bit different from some people that come into Spoken Word, you know everyone comes in different ways, but I think that for me and seeing the people in that scene they were so different from each other. Like Kent Foreman

would roll up in a long leather jacket, with like a cap on looking straight out of “Shaft” or something, and then you have someone like Cin Salach, you know the white lady with the pixie haircut you know kinda light spirited but very heavy and intense poem all at the same time, and then you have Mama Maria McCray who grew up half Black, half Filipino and she would tell stories of when she would grew up multi-racial at a time when that was super super super taboo, as well as she was a Marine in Vietnam, you know. People like Chuck Perkins, I believe that he was like a salesman at that time and he would drive in his car and he would compose the poems in his head while he was driving from these sales meetings or whatever. You know so you have people that were just vastly different from each other, all with vastly different stories, and flows and ways they put words together. So for me, this is where I always, always tell people that like if you go to the old open mic now and you feel like you don’t fit in, that’s good cause you shouldn’t feel like you fit in you know what I mean, because the whole point of the open mic is for everyone to express themselves and if everyone is sounding the same, I don’t know if I can curse in this but really its like “What the F**k is going on?”, then the real work isn’t being done. But that all depends on how people get initiated into Spoken Word, because for some people they get initiated into Spoken Word thinking that it means a certain rhythm or it means a certain content, or it means a certain swagger. And I just know for me that I feel very blessed that I grew up in a place that artistically, doing Spoken Word, being a Spoken Word artist, and participating in this art form really means that you just have to come to it with your full whole self, and that’s all you needed, nothing more nothing less. So yeah I could talk about that for ever so we should move on to the next question.

I: You’re saying you got a lot of support from your school, and probably a lot of your peers for Spoken Word. How did your family support you in that? (15:09)

TK: You know my family, this is a question that I get all the time, especially from Asian American audiences, it’s always the first thing like ‘oh my God what did your parents think?’ you know. And I don’t remember my parents seeing my Spoken Word performances in High School; I think that, you know I was a drama kid too. So they came to see some of my theatrical performances , I remember one performance where I was playing a schizophrenic poet that was not on her meds anymore, or something like that, and I remember they were very disturbed. But I think overall, when I was in high school I don’t remember them being involved in my life around Spoken Word. I think my parents, how would I say this best, I would say that my parents have really alternated between being somewhat supportive and very unsupportive through out my time as a Spoken Word artist. So it just has kinda depended on the time, and I think that some of that too is about coming of age and your relationship with your parents when you’re in your teens and twenties in general, you know kind of rocky and volatile when you’re coming into your own. Some of it is just that, but in general I think that when they interact with my work now they are starting to understand that it means something to other people.

I’m not sure how much they can personally relate to the stuff that I’m talking about, also I think they felt a little less comfortable about stuff that is disclosing about the family, although I do try to be very careful about that because I think there is a big distinction between my story to tell and then there is an issue around confidentiality. Which doesn’t mean necessarily that you can’t tell what happens to anybody else ever or what you think happened, you know but I think that it is important to be a little mindful of that, or I try to be. So sometimes a story that needs to be told is a story that needs to be told

for me, for the poetry. I think that my parents are like typical brain drainers, you know what I mean, like they worked really hard... I kind of joke that I'm not very model minority, but my parents definitely are, you know what I mean, they worked their asses off, they really worked their asses off in school, they came to the U.S. Even my parents go back to Taiwan, my dad says 'Oh I went to Taida and I live in America and I've lived in America for the last 40 years' and it's like he's a total rock star, you know. So it makes sense to me that they worked their asses off to come here, coming from a Taiwan that is not like the Taiwan that we know and see today, not the Taiwan that makes the mass majority of laptops, computers, and microchips around the world. The Taiwan that they left was a Taiwan that was in the midst of some pretty heavy political strife, a lot of issues in term of political repression, and their childhood was really spent where tens of thousands of people were being killed. Between Chiang Kai-Shiek's hold and the Taiwanese folks that were [omit n't] there, they went through some crazy stuff. I know about that now as an adult, I didn't know that then. So of course our life circumstances are enormously different, so our choices are going to be enormously different. So it's been hard for me at different times, a part of me of course wants them to be like 'oh this is great, this is wonderful you're changing the world and blah blah blah', you know what I mean, but for them they can only see it to a point and see parts of me to a point. They try to understand, and sometimes for them to understand is easier for them and sometimes it's harder depending on what the issue is at the time. So I would say that it is a tenuous relationship, it's a complicated relationship, and I think that it is just very real because our life circumstances have been vastly, vastly different, and the choices that we've had in front of us have been very different. I mean you grow up in Taiwan, or somewhere in general more like the majority or whatever, you're not gonna think about identity as much as an issue, I don't think. And for them there might have been times when they were like, why can't you just put that aside so you can focus on whatever it is your supposed to do, and I was like, focusing on this is what I am supposed to do because this is a big issue and this is a big issue for me here. This is my life, you know, and you can't expect that you're going to come all the way here from Taiwan and like I'm only going to hang with Taiwanese people and live the same Taiwanese life here because it's not possible, it's not realistic and it isn't my reality. My reality is growing up in a very mixed culture, my reality is being a part of an Asian America, my reality is also a legacy of what my family has come from and how that interacts with American history and American culture and where that puts me. You know both the opportunities, and the challenges, all the privileges as well as all the complications.

I: So you've lived in different parts of Chicago and now in New York, how do you think that has influenced your work?

KT: I think in a lot of different ways. Sometimes I think to myself, am I so vastly generalizing here, you know. But I do feel that, for example when I was in Chicago from 2000 to 2004, and of course intermittently when I was in college and being part of the Chicago scene, it just feels like... Sometimes I miss those old days you know. Like when it would be all of us at the open mic, and I'm like, am I romanticizing this nostalgic point in time or something like that. But there was this feeling of like, we were coming to the page, we were coming to the stage, we were coming to share, we were coming to perform, this is our community and we're committed to getting better as much as we could all the time. We're dorks, we would not only perform at the open mics, but we would also read poetry in each

others' living rooms. I had totally forgotten about that until my friend who is here in the Bronx, who had lived in Chicago for awhile, was like don't you remember the first time I met you was when we were reading poetry in your living room. And I was like I totally don't remember that and it's so funny. But I think there was something very special and unique about the chemistry at that time, and the whole Spoken Word scene in general and in particular in the Asian American community. We had a lot, a lot of energy and we were motivating in a lot of different events and organizations, you know, really pushing each other, challenging each other, supporting each other, fighting with each other, making up with each other during that time.

I feel like that is pretty different to my experiences in New York, like of course whenever you are a transplant anywhere it's gonna feel different. I think there is a couple major differences, for me and in my personal experience of being a spoken word artist in Chicago and being a spoken word artist in New York. Me personally, I felt that people were way, way, way more focused on or much more savvy on the commercial side or the business side when I came here [New York]. Sometimes that's great and sometimes it's not so great, cause I felt like, man people write two poems and they already got a DVD, a website, a press kit and they're trying to book a tour everywhere. Where as in Chicago, you have people who would be writing for 15 years and coming to the open mic and performing, it never occurred to them to just sit down and make a chapbook. You know like just go to Kinko's and print something out and copy it up, whatever. So I think that there is both good and bad sides to both, because I think in some ways in Chicago there's so much commitment to the craft and just working and working and working at it, that I think sometimes if you could take a step back and say look this is time to show this shit off, you know? It's like you put all this effort in, it's really time to let it be seen, let it be heard, let it be known and put it out there. But I feel like even now there is a little distrustful attitude about that kind of approach more so in Chicago, as opposed to New York. Yeah of course there is a lot of pressure to produce out here, you got to be producing a lot of work, and you gotta do a lot of shows, you got to be not just working on what you were doing but also something new, not all the time but almost all the time. You got to be motivated, from my experience there is a lot more hustle mentality out here. And sometimes I don't know if this is because these environments are so different or is it because I'm different here, something like that and it might be both. I think on the creative side for spoken word artists in particular I think that there is a lot more emphasis on the performance side out here. I mean out in Chicago there's a lot of people that are great performers and great writers, the people I knew in the spoken word scene, I would say generally think of themselves as writers first, writers that can perform. Where as I feel that a lot more people here that were performers first and then they decided to write because they want to do spoken word, people who are singers, actors, comedians, or are coming from these different traditions and are thinking about spoken word, almost pulling from different things into what they're doing.

So that's what I would say are some of the major differences. I think in the Asian American communities here is a wonderful, beautiful, amazing legacy of people that have been writing and performing in the community. Like the people that were part of the Basement Workshop back in the day, and I think that it definitely inspired the work that we were doing at the time in Chicago with the Asian American Artist Collective. We wanted something like the way the Basement Workshop had. And it's great when I'm

here in New York it means a lot to me to see folks like Fay Chiang who are in everything, they don't care if people are in their teens or twenties at an entire event, you know they'll be there because they believe in it, they believe in us, they believe in the community. I think to see that kind of consistent work to me as a visible artist who is doing a lot of stuff in the Asian American activist community... I don't know if in Chicago it was that there was less going on back in the day or if it's not archived or if people moved on somewhere else, but I think that it's really exciting and important and says a lot for my own spirit when you actually get to see David Henry Hwang around and still doing great work and still committed to the vision that they were committed to 20-30 years ago. That has been really great and I think it's been very positive on my work, and very positive on the way I think because on the community, New York is so big that... at times in the Chicago Asian American community, if we weren't doing it, organizing it, you know me, Laura, Marlon, Anida, Sam, Lani you know everyone in the Asian American Arts Collective, like if we weren't going to organize the event was the event going to happen? And that's a lot of pressure, if there isn't anything happening in the Asian American community it requires us to be much more active all the time, and it's easy to be burnt out that way. Here in New York there's different pockets and different scenes, the Basement Workshop kinda expanded to Asian American Writers Workshop who has a much more formal vibe to it. What's cool about that is that they regularly hold events that are like speed dating for writers to connect with a literary agent so that they connect the Asian American community with the publishing industry that is here and that whole web of networks to work with resources. Here they have the Asian American Arts Alliance and many other art specific organizations based on neighborhoods. I'm definitely glad that my roots began in Chicago, it has given me a good foundation to stand on for where I am now where there is a lot going on all the time and so you have to be very clear with your values and your art and connect with the right people in an authentic way, and Chicago teaches you that.

I: How do you think that the Midwest influences art, more specifically Asian American artists?

KT: I think in a lot of different ways. It's so funny because I remember when we were doing the National Asian Pacific Islander American Spoken Word Summit in 2003, there was like a spoken word artist from the Bay and she was like, yeah people in Chicago are a lot angrier, and you're like, it's because it's different. Because they were walking, it was a big group of Asian Americans, down the street and I guess dude yelled some racial slur from his car and they were all super horrified. And it's not that I don't think that is a horrible thing to go through but being from Chicago you kinda get not so surprised that that happens. And it makes you a little tough, I don't know if callous is the right word, but it makes you a little tough and a little callous to that kinda verbal assaults, and it does make you angry and want to assert yourself in a way. That when you're in places that you're more the majority like on the West Coast, it's not so much the case. You know I got friends on the West Coast that went to public high schools that were all Asian, and there might be some schools here in New York that are all Asian like that but not many. That definitely affects it a great deal. It's funny too because when I was talking to another Asian American dude from the Bay he was saying to me, you know Kelly I think I'm gonna start branching out to more than just the Filipino spoken word scene. In my mind I was saying that's great because he's not just talking about the Asian American spoken word scene, but he's talking about just the Filipino spoken word scene, like there's not enough happening in Chicago at that time for us to

fraction off in that way. In Chicago it was mostly everybody in a collective mixed with Filipino, Cambodian, Thai, some Japanese artist and we didn't have the numbers to not create that coalition, and I think there is something really good about that because I learned so much about different cultures and all of our different histories that I would never learn from my families or like my own personal experiences as a Chinese-Taiwanese American. For me to be able to understand that, become connected with that and start to see that it has something to do with me I think is very positive, and when we're talking about that whole pan-Asian Pacific Islander American identity, it's something that is lacking in a very simple sense. We are very unfamiliar with each other's cultures, unfamiliar with the histories of even our own individual ethnic groups here in the United States. There's just a lot of education in sharing and life experiences that need to be cross-fertilized in some of our minds, and that's just some of the things that come from the Midwest. I was kinda laughing at the story about moving out of the Filipino spoken word scene, but for me I love spoken word and I will go to anywhere that spoken word is. So I would go to a thing in Humboldt Park and hang out with all the folks there, or the different sets on the South Side or West Side or whatever, because where spoken word is, is where I'm gonna be. Mostly because it is also my culture, my community and at this point something I have been doing for more than half my life, it is something very familiar and where I am at home. But it is also growing up in the scene in the Chicago area, always very clear and negotiating being in these places when you're maybe the only Asian person there. I know the story of like Dennis and Marlon, I think they met because they were the only Asians. People ask me all the time, they think I was in *I Was Born With Two Tongues* because people all assume if your Asian and from Chicago, then you were in *I Was Born With Two Tongues*, but not I wasn't in *Two Tongues* but I was around and close to everybody. But it's all good for me because I am very comfortable around an Asian American audience, I'm comfortable around a Black audience, White, Latino, a mixed audience. And I think that growing up in the Midwest; you have to be as an artist if you want to follow your artwork wherever it goes.

I: That's true, I can feel that. I had mentioned earlier that I had seen your "Making Guacamole" performance online and I can feel that comfort of Chicago when you talk about Ogden and the Taqueria. That's awesome, even in spoken word I could feel that comfort.

KT: That's good because that for me is a piece that is very specific as growing up as the person that I am in the Chicago because you are forced to confront different things, different kinds of people and forced to interface with different types of questions. Like a little anecdote I tell is that I worked on the West Side for 1 year after I graduated from college and one of my students asks me, after a year of working there, she says, you know Kelly I'm so happy you worked here because before I only thought that there were Black people and White people, but now I know that there is Black people, White people, and Chinese people. I was like, this is good, this is progress. But I think that that is so real because that was in North Lawndale and you look only 8 blocks away and you have a large Latino community. And in terms of how things are bordered, I mean we can talk about how Chicago is a segregated city and the different political mandates that was creating that, real estate and housing and how its affecting that and just the way it is etched into our minds like when we say 'oh that's up north I'm not going there' even though it could be less than 10 blocks away. There can be a psychological distance that can be greater than the physical distance. And the psychological distance with Asian American communities is particularly large

because of a lack of interactions in an intimate way. So those are some of my different thoughts with of the Midwest. I do miss the Midwest because it feels like a place where people just feel comfortable being themselves and don't try to be something else. It isn't a good thing to try and be something you're not, and it isn't necessarily like that elsewhere. A type of real trust in the groundedness of your personality, more of a value placed on being grounded, down to earth, and authentic. In the spoken word scene, it was important to bring your authenticity or no one cared.

I: Was it hard to gain exposure and funding for your art projects before or even now?

KT: Well, I don't think I ever started off in Spoken Word thinking, how am I going to get exposure. I remember when I first came from Chicago to New York and I was producing at an event over at the Nuyorican Poets Café and I had made the fliers for my friends, and I was just so used to how you'd do in Chicago were you cut up a bunch of quarter sheets you bought at Kinko's and pass them out. My friends here in New York were like, 'Are you kidding me', and I was like what's wrong with these, and they're like whatever. But that's just because they're so used to lofty postcards and stuff that they don't see it as being very professional. I think definitely moving into doing Spoken Word full-time, I didn't plan it. I guess that you could say that I fell into it, but I would say that I fell into it and then ran with it. I kept doing Spoken Word because it was something that I love, it was something that I love period. I didn't have any strong ideas or intentions on where it was going to go, and it just started to take on a larger portion or percentage of my life. And so I was touring a lot with Mango Tribe, and then auditioned with Def Poetry and got into Def Poetry, so things just gained momentum and, not to get too new-age, but it was like I was being looked in the face by the universe, creator, whatever you call it, and was like 'okay, I'm gonna throw the ball to you and you can do what you want with it'.

I: It was a very natural process for you?

KT: Yeah, it was natural but also very excruciating, it was hard. Leaving Chicago was hard, and leaving the people that I loved, the community that we had worked with and built for so many years, making the choice to come to New York, it was definitely very hard for me. I felt it was the right choice, but I struggled with it for a really long time because I missed that sense of community and groundedness, a plain authenticity. And I had to learn to start myself wherever I am as an artist and things just kept flowing. I had just talked to this guy who is like a sound recording engineer with movies and he was like 'what are we all in the business of', and he's like 'I'm not in the business of sound, I'm in the business of Problem Solving and we all are'. The organic way of things and the nature of it growing with consistent creativeness and innovative problem solving is how it is happening.

So with getting exposure and funding for art projects, of course Def Poetry has been a great thing that has really broken out my work to a lot of people, and that's been wonderful. The way "Black, White, Whatever" blew up on the internet was something that I couldn't have anticipated at all. Once it hit 10,000 hit I was like, 'oh good, I'm glad we made the video, it was so worth it' [and then it went on to hit over 250,000 views in a matter of days]. It really teaches you, the work we were doing in Chicago was so focused and we were very intentional about that, but the more I do this work the more I realize that there is no such thing as a solo artist. It has to be such a confluence of many different people believing in

a project, believing in an artist, believing in the impact that it will have on people. Whether it be a presenter connecting the audience, whether it be someone who is writing for a magazine, a producer in television, there are just so many people who are involved. So I feel very blessed to be connected to, and recently connected to people for whom my work means something. I really hope to try to connect the poetry to people that it will really mean the most to, and I have been lucky to have some good supporters in finding that. Funding is always an issue for everyone and everything no matter what scale you're at. I think I learned this more in New York when I attended this workshop, a woman that was producing for all these Disney projects on Broadway, we're talking about the biggest of the big. And I didn't know when I left for New York, there are so many people investing in these kinds of things, and a lot of people who aren't artistic people but only interested in the return on their money because someone who invested in Phantom of the Opera would be making way more money than any hit movie because it will be played worldwide from now until the end of time. So it was interesting hearing this woman that produces for Disney on Broadway, money is an issue for them. She was saying you cannot throw money at a problem, if it's the wrong idea then it's the wrong idea. On a smaller scale that is what any artist is dealing with. But when I think of the work that we did in Chicago with the Asian American Artist Collective, we definitely weren't financially compensated for the vast majority of our work. There is something very powerful about a team of people being so intensely committed to the work and to each other to make those kinds of huge sacrifices of energy, time, and spirit in making these things happen. At the same time, we didn't have the material resources to continue to sustain the work and people get burnt out. Really exposure is connecting the work to whom it will be more meaningful. In terms of funding, the founder of the dance group Urban Bush Women, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, that I had the pleasure of working with when I first got to New York would talk about how a lot of times we talk about community, but also have to talk about funders being a part of our community. They contribute something very important; they contribute resources that help us do what we would like to do. And it is very real, especially in activist communities of artists there is a slightly antagonistic viewpoint on money and funders, and very guarded and cagey attitude about it like, 'they're gonna change the whole thing or F**k this up because they have access and want to change us, blah blah blah'. These are things put in front of me where I try to figure out how I can reconcile these artistic issues that are part of an artistic life. Basically trying to be innovative in bringing together ethics, values, and spirit to fix a situation to create a new business model that will help sustain the work in the long run.

I: How was your experience with being part of the original collective of the Mango Tribe?

KT: What I remember of the early days of Mango Tribe was the sense of everybody coming together, no one really sure what was happening, well I think Anida knew and had a much more specific idea of what was happening and very clear about it. We were definitely the beneficiaries of that vision a great deal. We used to meet just about every Sunday over at the Atomic Kitchen Design space that was over by Union Park, kinda by the Green line. It was like a big open loft space and we would do different writing prompts every week, and I just remember it was a lot of writing and a lot of crying and a lot of sharing and getting to know each other. My best friends to this day are people who I became close to through Mango Tribe. It's funny that that was almost from ten years ago and relationships came and evolved so much since then. I feel like we would meet every week for like a year and write, but it was an interesting

thing that was very process oriented but had a culminating point. I can't remember if I realized from the beginning that we would be doing a show [which later became "Sisters In Smoke" in Chicago.] There were so many of us and doing rehearsals at Atomic Kitchen with our sleeping bags, you know camped out there. We really just shared a lot of our skills; we did a lot of 'here is what I know how to do, now teach me what you know how to do', as well as gossiping and being ridiculous, that was a lot of the early days. I'm sure there was a lot of meeting about what the show was gonna be about, and that the show was about violence and issues of the Asian American community, and a larger Diaspora. Then there was lots of rehearsals, and finally the show at the Vittum Theatre after pretty much a year of creating work. Of course I was a theatre kid, but it didn't have anything to do with that because the process was so different. Definitely when people do theatre, either regional plays or off Broadway, the model in general is that the script will be written and then you have a six week rehearsal period and then you put up the show, right. But it's something very different when it is cumulative in that way, it's just these little bits over the course of a year. It was just very natural to me, people look at the work we did and go 'oh wow, you're doing movement, and video, and poetry, and multimedia', and I do think that in Chicago there was a lot less multi-disciplinary work in general, but it felt very natural to us because we had people in the group who were b-girls, singers, graphic designers, and video people and it was just a nature expression of who we were. The shows also unearthed a lot of personal wounds that I think people were dealing with, and so it was very therapeutic, but also with the intention of being shared. That the transformative process wasn't just for us in creating it, but it was also in how we shared it. Those are my really strong memories of the first show we did and there was a lot going on at that time. At that time we were starting Mango Tribe, we were starting Asian American Artist Collective, Young Asians With Power (YAWP) at that time, it was just a lot of organizing. At that time I was working a full-time job too, so all my weekends were Mango Tribe, all my evenings would be Mango Tribe, all my vacation days would be Mango Tribe, and then also my solo spoken word stuff that was also a huge part of my artistic life too. So things were very, very busy at that time. One piece I did for the show was called "Sacrifice," it was a choreopoem piece, in some ways it's a fairly abstract piece but in other ways it is rather clear in my mind. It has to do with the idea of a continual sense of indebtedness that I think happens a lot when you grow up in an immigrant family. When you grow up in an Asian culture and there is this idea of a filial-piety that you're supposed to be displaying, but here America tells you that you're suppose to be independent and on your own. And you can do all this and dilute yourself into thinking you are so independent and still feel so much guilty that it can turn self-destructive in feeling that you can never repay the debt of all the sacrifices that your family has made for you. Now that I look back on all that I think how did we do all that. With Anida it was all much clearer because posters would show up, or sweatshirts and when I look back I think, man she was doing so much. It's funny because now when I interact with people, like working on my second spoken word video 'Weapons of Mass Creation,' the director said to me, well you're the EP, and I'm like, 'I'm the what?', and she said I was the executive producer because you got us all together, you got the money for this piece and doing all this, and I said that's because I come from everybody does everything. And so I don't even recognize that I am doing all that, so okay I'm the executive producer and I'm just glad I don't have to make sandwiches, but if I need to make sandwiches, I will.' So it has been an interesting experience moving on from Mango Tribe because we were all writing, we were all performing, we were all directing and doing various administrative and producing functions that we did not identify as that at the time. After awhile people

were like, we don't all have to sing, we don't all have to dance. But that first show was really central and gave us a healthy way to be exposed to that and give means into being in a working organization of artists that were working in a collective structure.

I: With all the experiences that you had had, what identity(s) do you give your self?

KT: I think for me I could say certain things that I write down on my bio all the time, I'm a Taiwanese-Chinese American Spoken Word artist born in Chicago, based in Brooklyn, Bam! A lot of the basic things. But I think that other things that are really core to my identity, I mean identity shifts and changes all the time. I think that the things that seem to be constant in my life, a deep commitment to gender issues, youth activism, understanding people in their deep total complexity. So complicating on the ideas that we think we know such as gender or political orientation. I don't know if those are ways that I would identify myself, but I know that those are ways that I move through the world. I think that that is all I would say to that... sometimes it's interesting cause I think in general in terms of sexuality I tend to not really disclose. I say to myself that I will let my poems speak for themselves, so if people hear certain poems that I do they'll be like, 'oh okay are you queer, are you bi', all kinds of stuff. I think for me personally it is something that is a question for me, so I don't have a real very direct answer and it's hard for me to not have an answer and not feel like a cop-out, like what are you trying to call yourself or something like that. For me I'm questioning myself and trying to learning how I feel and how to express myself in that way in terms of understanding all these different parts of myself. A lot of times I have felt very comfortable sharing intimate parts of myself through my poetry, and so what exists in the poem is what exists in me. In terms of what that means as an identity marker or label, that it makes me more clearer about, more developed analysis about, and some other parts I don't as much.

I: How do you identify Asian American identity, themes, or even history in your art work? What do you want the audience to gain from listening to your art work?

KT: My brain is still moving around from the other question in terms of identity and thinking about class. And I am very clear from the fact that I come from a very middle class, upper middle class suburban upbringing. I have had many different experiences in my adult life in different areas around the world, and I think that that definitely affects my art work as well. In terms of Mango Tribe too, in terms of themes that we were exploring and I do appreciate and think is important for Asian Pacific Islander American communities in general to be doing is we would talk about the interrelationships between different ethnic groups in the Diaspora. We would talk about some of the dynamics such as class, as related to citizenship, gender identity, gender expression, and talking about it and how it is the diversity of who we are, that's the diversity that I would hope we have an interest in exploring. In terms of how do you identify Asian American identity, themes, or even history in your art work? What do you want the audience to gain from listening to your art work? I don't know what do you think?

I: Well do you feel that it is almost important to address Asian American history because of the lack of it for a lot of people? I know for me until I started taking Asian American courses in college, I really had no idea about the history at all.

KT: Yeah I think that that is absolutely true and it's unfortunate. I mean it's great that there are more youth programs that are popping up around the country, but that's really specific to like if you are closer to city with a progressive group of Asian Americans who've decided to do a youth program, then maybe you'll learn about Asian American history. I definitely think that it is something that is important to me, but I don't... unless I am being asked to write something for an event, I'm not sitting down thinking how should I write about an Asian American issue today. But it's not like something that any of us have to report because if it happens to us, it happens in the work, you know, these are the things I think about, these are the things frustrate me, or annoy me, or fight me, or inspire me, so of course I'm gonna write about it. I think that in terms of addressing Asian American history, like when I think of Making Guacamole, I did write it for an Asian American youth conference in Chicago, and I love being able to write pieces that are very specific to.. well you know how there are artist that are like they 'don't want to think about what other people think, I'm an artist' and they think it somehow contaminates their vision if they're thinking about the audience. Well I think that there is a way to think about the audience in the same way that you would think about somebody as your having a conversation with them, without feeling like you have to pander to them. But if you're just gonna sit there and at like your not having a conversation with anybody, then you shouldn't be confused that nobody wants to listen to your sh*t. So in my mind I love to be able to really connect to a very specific audience. I think that that piece for me kinda erupted from a place where the issues that we confront in our community are not the same as what... there is definitely similarities and exceptions. It is not the same for what it is to be Black in the United States, to be Latino, to be Native American in the United States because they are very specific experiences and we have a lot of different histories and positions in history and it is important to look at that. So I think sometimes me personally feel like a very borrowed rhetoric, from the Black movement in the 60's with the Civil Rights struggle and superimposing it on the Asian American community, and yeah we have to understand that different things are happening like in our circumstance we have the model minority myth, while in the African American community it would be Talented Tenth, so there are intersections and similarities but also distinct differences of an Asian American nationalism that is specific to our community and what would I say if it was a utopian idea of our ideal nationalism according to me. Which I would hope makes people think about what an Asian American nationalism look like to them. This year some of the things that come up for me. I was working on a project about the Chinese railroad workers, but it's on hold right now, but as I get older I do find myself wanting to fill that gap about some basic things that I feel we should know and face how the identity of Asian Pacific Islander American identity has been manipulated in society through out history. In my work I try as much as possible to be as authentic to these stories, while trying to simultaneously tell my own story through it. What I want the audience to gain from listening is when they respond by saying, that's how I've been feeling but didn't have words for it, or I have so many emotions in me that I don't even know how to say it and that's good. When working in Chicago I was very concerned with making sure I was placing a question to people's minds, and as time went on also an exploration to their hearts. It may sound corny, but to help people explore their emotions and not just the intellectual rationalizations.

I: So you're saying that's the way that you would use Asian American themes and history in your art work at times, but you don't want to strictly have to work on that all the time. When has it been empowering or restricting to be labeled an Asian American artist?

KT: I feel that some random blog that I visit about spoken word artist was like, she's great but she doesn't strictly write only about Asian American issues, and I'm like, does anyone only strictly write about Asian American issues? But that's good because what's naturally occurring in me is what is naturally occurring in the poem. I don't feel that much that I am labeled, it's just what I am and it's something I can't change. I don't think that it is about what I am labeled as, it's more like if I am asked to perform at an event the question is why was I asked to perform at the event. Because they needed anything Asian, cause then that is not going to be a strong show. I am realizing more the role of presenters and producers and it's very critical of the vision of what the show will be like, what the audience will be like, the neighborhood it's gonna be in. My responsibility is to come and be me and bring it to the stage, so even if it's an event with me and some lion dancers and someone singing Kpop (Korean pop) songs. There is nothing wrong with that, they are just vastly different and curated right in the right way they can be very powerful together instead of random. What I liked about the Chicago community was that we were very straight forward about it, like I'm an Asian American artist and I'm proud of that. I get frustrated it's frustrating when people I look up to don't want to be seen as Asian American artists because they somehow find that pejorative cause they feel like to be a great Asian American artist means I'm not a great artist like I'm not good enough to be one, and I don't think that that necessarily has to do with that. But in your pursuit of universal greatness, or whatever, you shouldn't have to feel like you have to erase a part of yourself.

I: Can you tell me the meaning behind Self-Centered?

KT: So I was doing a hip hop theater show in Chicago about the way that media shapes gender and ourselves. And when we were being told about the show we were propositioned about the show and using the 'Other' and how it is used in mainstream media. And we were sitting and doing research and I was like I'm so tired of being the in the role of the Other and always on the outside and always being marginalized. And I was bored with the way that we were creating that work and trying to figure out ways to talk about being on the outside of something. So I was like what if I was to flip it, and I was the one to that other people were peripheral to, if I was the one that was at leisure think about other people that were different from me. It was so funny cause Idris, another poet that was part of the show, at the end of the show I was like, well the aim of the poem is if I were the center of everything for a day everything would be aimed towards, dictated by, catered to, tailored for five foot two tattooed Asian females. And I go on flipping the whole world this way, and at the end I say, but you know what? I might let you (non-five-foot-two-tattooed-Asian-girl people) keep your languages, and Idris was like, 'Well why was it might, why isn't it I will?' And I just looked at him and was like, 'Because I might not!' because that was what privilege is about. And I don't need to erase parts of me to be universal and relatable, and I just have to really bring it with my intelligence, with my talents, with my work and not always internalize that I am always on the outside.

I: In 'Little Red Books' ('Mao') you use sayings from different languages. How do other cultures influence your art?

KT: It's actually entitled 'Little Red Books,' but for some reason they just called it 'Mao' [on 'Def Poetry']. But in terms of how other cultures influence my art, I consume all different ways of art, of all cultural traditions, all different genres, styles, mediums. In terms of other cultures influencing the art in 'Little Red Books,' I was using different phrases in Mandarin that were phrases that we learned in Chinese school. And the Spanish phrase at the end, 'siempre luchando por paz y revolucion', it really speaks to the experience here in the US. [Omit: You go to Sunday school and learn the meanings, then] You learn about the Black power movement, then about Mao, then Che. My friend that was Chilean would sign off his emails that way, and I remember he came to Def Poetry and was like, 'Thank you for dissing me in front of the entire world.' But we're playful in that way. I remember we were all out together, me, my friend that's Chilean, and friend that's Palestinian, and my Chilean friend was talking about being exiled and moving around. And he looked at me and was like, 'Exile, what do you know about exile?', and my other friend who is Palestinian was like, 'Hello she's from Taiwan, what do you think exile is? That's exile forever.' And again it naturally occurs in my poetry because it naturally occurs in my life. I think that [omit: think about] how different cultures influence the art is because all the different cultures [omit: and friends] find resonance in each other and understanding that [omit: other facts] have brought us together for this conversation.

I: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

KT: I think that as time goes on the venues get nicer, the crowds get bigger, you get more recognition. Obviously things on the internet has changed everything, cause everything is on Youtube, its funny cause people will say, 'Oh I saw you on Youtube,' and I know that's normal but its like a place now. Like, 'Oh I saw you at this show, but it's not this show it's Youtube, it's its own place in the universe.' And that has changed things for me as people have relationships with me from a 4 inch picture on a screen than a natural experience of me in real life and that's very different and exciting. Everything I do is such a mix of stuff, I think I have done less theatrical work, less dance work, less collaborative work over time, and focusing more on my work as a solo artist especially over the last 3 years. I love to do spoken word in places that have never experienced spoken word before, but I also love to do the coffee houses and poetry slam events. You can call hip hop artists and spoken word artists as folk artists with the culture that it comes from, if you stay away from the culture too long, nothing horrible will happen to the art, but there is a culture that the art comes from. So In a given touring season, it could range from anything like a huge event of a thousand people, like I performed last summer at the Campus Progress National Conference were I opened in the morning and Bill Clinton closed in the evening, it was just bananas. At the same time performing at Lincoln Benter has a different vibe than a show at Blue Stockings that's a small political bookstore here in New York. I love that about my career, as a writer and performer that Spoken Word is such a new art form that people don't know what to do with it, so I can do it anywhere and I can explore the different kinds of relationships with audiences through the different places and spaces of shows.

I: I think your website mentions that you had been to a couple of the Louder Than A Bomb events in Chicago and I used to volunteer at those all the time. So it's a lot of youth and a lot of energy there, how was your experiences with it? 2:5:31

KT: Yeah! I love, you know I am like the biggest geek hosting poetry slams cause I get super, super into it. But you know it's the culture I grew up in, I always tell people I grew up mostly learning how to write poetry by hanging out in bars when I wasn't supposed to be. And when you're giving it up for people you got to get loud, you got to get rowdy, you got to get bad, this is not some bullshit somebody's coming up here. People are putting their whole guts out there and that needs to be recognized, it needs to be appreciated. They come to the mic as fully as they can and you have a role to play, and that's what I think is great about growing up in poetry slams and being part of a lot of Hip Hop communities because it's a responsibility, you got to keep the energy, you have the ability to connect with audience, you have the ability to make their night. Being a part of Louder Than A Bomb is always fun, you know, and last year I hosted a bunch of the pre-lims and I was a secret judge. I judged based on writing because they wanted to do a secret award this year that was to judge only on writing. But again that is so Chicago, you what I mean because I do not think that any other city does that for the youth slam, because they're like, if you're going to strip all the performative elements away, who wrote the best 'cause the Chicago people still want to know. And I love to see the different ways that people express themselves through Spoken Word. In general I feel like every three years or so it is kind of like a different generation in terms of how the style is, how the words are approached, content and all that kind of stuff. Now there is so much choreography, like people setting up mic's backwards or jumping around. There was a really dope event that I judged here in New York through Urban Word NYC, which is like the equivalent organization to Young Chicago Authors, and I've also been involved with Brave New Voices and Youth Speaks. But it was such a dope event it was called like Slam of the Ages, and they took all the different Urban Word slam teams from 2000 to 2009 and had them all slam against each other. It was so cool to see it and you could really see the styles and the aesthetics and the way people approached spoken word was very different. Of course some of the people that were older were not as practiced as some of the young bucks that had just won the year before, but it was just really cool to be there. I like to see that, and these slams in general, well I haven't really been around a much adult slam stuff in a very long time, but the youth slams in general has really positive energy to it and really places it in the spirit of 'This is what the poetry can do for your life'. That's great to be a part of, you know and YCA (Young Chicago Authors) definitely does that.

I: Your video piece 'Black, White, Whatever...' was seen on Youtube.com by over 200,000 viewers in a week. How has the media, internet, and viral video sites effected you and your work?

KT: It's really exciting and encouraging, I'm very old school and like my cheap spiral bound notebook from the dollar store, and also I get excited about the possibilities of technology and the possibilities of being able to connect with people in a different way. This guy was saying that before you could just go to certain places to get information in general, but now with broadcasting and internet there is such accessibility but now it's about making sure that the audience finds you. My friend's friend who works at

Interscope Records was saying that it was getting harder to pin point specific tastes for youth these days because of the internet and their access to a mash up of genres. A kid who is into Hip Hop, is not just into Hip Hop, or a kid who is into Rock & Roll isn't just into Rock & Roll. And that's what's happening today in the revolution of technology and the way that we interact with each other. How it affects us is how it is expressed in the art. For 'Black, White, Whatever...', we had this idea about the election and making a video. So we just were like we should post it on Youtube and email it to different bloggers to spread the word. And the response was very overwhelming, it was the night right before the election while I was phone banking for Obama and I was like, 'Thank goodness, I don't have to send another email about 'Black, White, Whatever...', we got a good response and yeah.' The next morning I had hundreds of emails for 'Black, White, Whatever...', because it was posted on the first page of Youtube and it was crazy. And I was like, how else could this be possible in any other time in history, that 200,000 people could view something that we made here in Brooklyn that's a completely an independent project and to also find its audience and spread, it's amazing. In terms of how it's affected my work that it has taught me that there are so many people out there who want to see their lives and perspectives reflected back to them. The feedback that we got was that from people that felt invisible and also felt like they were excluded from the conversation and were like, 'Thank goodness someone said something about it!'

I: On your website, yellowgurl.com, it lists your future projects as *Sleep on Wood* (2010) and *Real Women I Know* (2010). What are your future hopes and goals that you wish to work for in your art?

KT: A lot of things really. I have been sitting on writing a manuscript of a book for a while now, and a lot of time a lot of small publishers of poetry tend to focus on the academic poetry that is written for the page. And sometimes the way that spoken word is written on the page doesn't feel as good to them, so I've been trying to figure out a way to do what I like to do and put it into a good book medium and really see it the way I want it to come about. The first book I'm working on I really want to focus on youth activism and youth activism around the world through poems. And creating a manuscript is a little different because you have to think about the overall arch, I'm thinking about it having to be a narrative. I stopped saying that I'm a choreographer, I'm a film maker, and just say I'm a Spoken Word artist that does a lot of different stuff. *Sleep on Wood* (2010) (formerly, "The Grieving Room", is a spoken word-based hip hop theater solo show that re-casts theatrical space into an imaginary sphere where grief is honored and integrated into our lives in contemporary America) is gonna be very theatrical with a lot of movement and very multi-disciplinary, but I still love Spoken Word as a very cabaret art form. It's just one person and a mic and an audience with spontaneous interactions. So I'm really trying to commit to perfecting that art form as much as possible. I think in Spoken Word there is a lot of thinking and innovation with trying to figure out where we can take this art form. I've seen what it does to people. I've seen how powerful it can be and there has to be a better format and maybe draw from other art forms. So developing spoken word in a cabaret format, theatrical performances like *Sleep on Wood* (2010), in terms of movie making I am open to see where that goes, but I'm not exactly sure what that would look like. There is not proper way to do this, you just try to make it better and better every time and I want to bring that freshness to all the different things that I will be working on. So we'll see where all that will go and I feel very lucky to have that in Chicago, with Mango Tribe and how critical it was with

the formation of my thought process, my values, my perspective and my way of being just as a human being in my life.

[End of Interview]

Examples of Kelly Tsai's Spoken Word Work as Mentioned in the Interview

Making Guacamole

By Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai

Eating a guacamole taco at a taqueria
in the West side ghetto where I work,
I am suddenly sent back
to the sight of my older sister at 12
kneeling on a stool at the kitchen counter
of our parents' home.

She sat scooping green slivers of avocado
from out of their broken skins.

Anxious and small, I squeezed the round limes,
put their juicy pulp to my tongue, plowed my
greedy little fingers through finely diced piles of
tomatoes, onions, and peppers, hoping to be
the one to mash them all together in the end.

My sister and I were not trying to start a dialogue.
We were not trying to be politically correct.
We were not trying to bridge the gap.

Looking out the restaurant's windows,
I see construction workers drill away on Ogden,
reminding me that white folk usually
don't come here unless they are
drug users, missionaries, or doctors
soon cruising away seemingly undisturbed
in their shiny cars.

Some days, I adopt the same looks
of suspicion and surprise
when I see one of these outsiders
walk awkwardly 'round the neighborhood,

I wonder what they're doing here,
glance at my own wrist, and
realize the hypocrisy of my question,
knowing that ever since I was small,
I was supposed to have a color in America,
which is neither black nor white.

I am not a chameleon,
although sometimes,
I do think that I try to be.

I am struggling to reason what we have in common,
what it could be worth, tearing away at ancient Asian histories
to build the unified front of today's Asian American society.



I dream of a cocky Asian nationalism when sisters
wear chi-paos and kimonos and our hair in those
seriously funky gravity-defying do's every single day,
when we have taken all of our languages melded into one
to recall us to our values and our pride,
when we have a voting block and boycott power not to be fucked with,
when our music saddled to the buck wild backs of Asian rhythms,
is blared down neighborhood streets from open windows,

when somebody could tell me to quit acting so yellow and
we would both understand what that could possibly mean,
when we can belong to something and it can belong to us,
when we are proud of our accents knowing yes,
this is what American English sounds like too,

when screaming out yellow and brown power can encompass
all of the stories of refugees from war-torn Vietnam, Cambodia,
Sri Lanka, of my parents who were lured here by the brain drain,
of the Japanese nisei and issei in the American internment camps,
of the Pinoys who first came to the Dirty South in the mid-1700's,
of the Chinese who drove the stakes into the railroads and
worked along side with black sharecroppers in Mississippi,

a nationalism with the weight of all of these things and more
marking the day when my family will quit saying
American when they mean
white,

when we will have chucked out
our own sense of eternal foreignness,
when we can envision the face of America as ourselves.

But my life has never made that much sense,
been that clear, that pure, that unwavering
listening to hip hop, I press skip pass the
tracks as my identity is spun as
stingy Korean shop owners
or ball-busting Kung Fu masters.

I wonder now which of my childhood friends understand
that race consciousness is not optional for everyone.

I find the same values for family amongst Latinos,
the same sense of guilt in Catholics and Jews,
the same insignificance shared with Arab Americans
and Native Americans.
When anyone asks me, 'what is my community?'
It will be a complicated answer
coming from the lips of a child of immigrants, who were
convinced that to simply exist in America was to succeed.

Eating a guacamole taco at a taqueria
in the West side ghetto where I work,

I think of my sister scooping and slicing vegetables.
I think of all of this.
I think of all that kids do when left to their own devices,
how there were so few boundaries for us,
how we found joy in it, how something as odd as

two Taiwanese girls in Chicago
making guacamole during the mid-1980's tells the story
of the creeping of contacts and contexts,
cultures and colors, finding homes
in the foundations of our minds
creating the rituals of the community of us

Self-Centered

by Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai

If I were the center of everything for a day...

everything would be aimed towards, dictated by, catered to,
tailored for five foot two tattooed Asian females

when you turned on the television – no Martha Stewart,
no Oprah, no Tom Brokaw, Katie Couric, or Steven Colbert,
only five foot two tattooed Asian females giving
make-up tips for the Asian eye, how to raise children
multilingually in America, custom-design builders who
retrofit houses for the fabulously petite, news that focuses
the latest community organizing campaigns and
where the hottest DJ set is for that night.

everything catered to me – all the movies will tell the
stories of wayward brainiac liberated activist single girls
and their pot dealer mc boyfriends, healing wounds
with families overseas while striving to create fair wages for factory
workers around the world, which would be easier since all the governments
would be run by five foot two tattooed Asian girls,
we'd wave to the camera enthusiastically, give free sandwiches
out to the entire world every Wednesday, we'd match our
lipgloss to our fair trade boots and throw a dance party every time
we passed a truly revolutionary bill.

and I'd get to ask people dumb questions all day about things
that just never occurred to me, because isn't everybody a five foot
two tattooed Asian girl, and isn't it so great to be us?

but you know what? i might let you (non-five-foot-two-
tattooed-Asian-girl people) keep your languages, and
I might even give you equal access to health care and education too,
I might even let you share the airwaves, the houses of government,
and give you a shot of working your way up in the financial institutions,
because I know there is no you without me, and from the center to the
margin, there is no me without you.



